PA/PC/CM:HHeinonis:dj H 142-1250, 142-0223 Clearances: EA: 10/80
X24933 11-10-80 & EUR: 7/80 H: Mr. Itoh

Blue

November 14, 1980

P800150-1871

Dear Mr. Devine:

I am replying to your inquiries of October 20 to the Departments of State and Defense on behalf of Dorr Phelps concerning the use of chemical weapons in Laos and Afghanistan.

The Government of Laos, aided by the Vietnamese, has waged campaigns since 1975 to bring the Hmong tribespeople under control. The Hmong, who traditionally have maintained an autonomous existence in northern Laos, have fought back using small arms and ammunition that they had stored in the mountains.

The Lao Government has used a combination of persuasion and force to bring the Hmong out of their highland homes to new settlements in the lowlands. The Lao Government argues that the Hmong method of agriculture destroys valuable hardwood forests, Laos' principal natural resource. The Lao also argue that, by bringing the Hmong population to the lowlands, the Government can better limit the production of opium, a principal Hmong crop which supplies the heroin markets of the world through illicit channels. The Lao and Vietnamese military forces dealing with Hmong who refuse to resettle under Lao Government control reportedly have used very harsh measures, often against civilians. There also have been widespread reports that the Lao and Vietnamese forces are using poison gas, or some other toxic chemical, against the Hmong in some particularly remote areas.

The United States is deeply concerned about the plight of the Hmong. For some years, the U.S. Government has been aware of these reports that chemical agents may have been used in Laos against dissident minority groups, and has sought to gather more information. By 1978, the United States had enough information to bring the matter to the attention of the Government of Laos, which denied the validity of the reports. We received the same response when we asked the Soviet and Vietnamese Governments to look into the reports and end the practice if true. In addition to our

The Honorable
Samuel L. Devine,
House of Representatives.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
REVIEWED BY I. Hearn DATE 8/31/82
RDS☐ or XDS☐ EXT. DATE
TS AUTH. REASON(S)
EXEMPT EXISTING MARKINGS ☐
DECLASSIFIED ☐ RELEASABLE ☑
RELEASE
FA or FOIA EXEMPTIONS

regular interviews of refugees, we sent two teams to the refugee camps in 1979 specifically to investigate this matter.

Reports of incidents have continued, with the largest attack reportedly occurring in May 1980. In view of this, U.S. officials, including Secretary Muskie, have expressed our deep concern over the use of chemical weapons in Laos and other countries before international organizations like the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross. We have asked these bodies and other countries to be alert for information that would bear on these reports, and to use any information they might have to oppose the use of chemical weapons. In addition, Department of State officials have testified before the Congress on this issue twice since last December.

The U.S. Government cannot confirm or conclusively disprove reports of the use of chemical weapons in remote areas where we have no presence, such as the areas reportedly affected in Laos. However, the issue is sufficiently serious and the reports significant and credible enough to warrant a thorough, impartial international investigation - a step we have called for and would welcome. Whether these particular reports are true or not, the entire international community has an interest in seeing that chemical warfare is not used.

As concern Afghanistan, it is in the nature of the conflict there that the world presently does not possess conclusive physical evidence on whether lethal chemical agents have been used. Although reports are unconfirmed, we believe they should be investigated further. We have taken steps to insure that international attention is focused on this problem. For example, we supported the February resolution of the United Nation Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva, which condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a violation of human rights and called upon the Soviets to refrain from acts of oppression and tyranny in Afghanistan.

We have also recommended to the Commission that an independent, investigative committee be established to receive testimony from refugees and to examine the sites of alleged chemical attacks and other relevant evidence. The establishment of such an investigative committee will help

to clarify the facts and to deter future use of these agents by making it clear that the world is watching and closely monitoring the reported use of lethal chemical weapons.

Sincerely,

J. Brian Atwood
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

Enclosure:

Correspondence returned.